FBI Counterintelligence Plan Against Radicals Outlined

3/19/74

By Susanna McBee
Washington Post Staff Writer

The man responsible for the FBI's controversial counterintelligence program against extremist groups in the 1960s was former Assistant Director C. Sullivan, whom the late J. Edgar Hoover ousted in 1971, according to a Brandeis University professor.

John T. Elliff, an assistant professor of politics who has studied the FBI for the last three years, made the disclosure in testimony before a Senate Judiciary subcomittee. He also said that Sullivan was the source of another program, the so-called "Huston plan," which called for bugging, break-in, and mail cover operations against radicals.

Sullivan, who is now retired, confirmed Elliff's comments about his role in the counterintelligence program but said he was not the "sole source" of the "Huston plan."

Elliff, who has written numerous articles on the FBI and is now working on a book about the bureau, said Sullivan's role in the counterintelligence-disruption program is revealed in two memos the FBI relased last January.

One, dated May 9, 1968, was written to Sullivan, then head of the domestic intelligence division of the FBI, by his deputy, Charles D. Brennan.

The memo outlined the rationale for starting an FBI program to "expose, disrupt, and otherwise neutralize the activities" of the New Left.

"It shows that the program initiated in the office headed by Sullivan," Elliff told a reporter after his testimony. The next day Director Hoover sent memos all over the country initiating the program, Elliff noted.

The second memo, dated April 27, 1971, also was written by Brennan, then head of the intelligence division, to Sullivan, then assistant to Hoover. That memo said the counterintelligence programs, which the FBI called COINTELPROs, should be discontinued "for security reasons because of their sensitivity."

Elliff cited a memo that Hoover sent to field agents the next day that said, "Effective immediately, all COINTELPROs operated by this bureau are discontinued."

Sullivan, reached last night at his home in Sugar Hill, N.H., said several FBI men working for Brennan thought up the program. "I had nothing to do with the thought behind it but I approved it 1,001 per cent," he said. "And I was responsible for it."

Elliff told the Senate subcommittee he learned of Sullivan's role in the 1970 surveillance plan that was named for a former White House aide, Tom Charles Huston, from several interviews with Sullivan and with current FBI officials.

Sullivan confirmed Elliff's description of him as the acting chairman of the working group that devised the plan, which President Nixon approved in July, 1970, then rescinded five days later at the insistence of Hoover. Huston has since said he told Mr. Nixon at the time that the plan was illegal.

Sullivan said that the intelligence community represented on the working committee was concerned over the FBI's inability to solve "the bombings and killings that were going on at the time."

He said he suggested reinstatement of old techniques, including burgaries, which the FBI had used at least since 1926 and which Hoover had discontinued in mid-1966. But he said, that others on the committee advocated their reinstatement, too, and that the "Huston plan" was therefore a group effort.

"I accepted it as traditional government policy," Sullivan said. Hoover later told him he was worried that the plan was "too dangerous," and both he and the director outlined Hoover's objections in footnotes to the plan itself, Sullivan added.

In his testimony, Elliff outlined a fascinating power struggle between Sullivan, whom he called the FBI's "leading intellectual," and Hoover, who ultimately forced Sullivan to resign in October, 1971. Hoover died in May, 1972.

Referring to the counterintelligence operations, Elliff said, "While Hoover approved those measures, Sullivan chafed under the director's other restrictions. For example, FBI agents were barred from undercover infiltration of New Left groups. Instead, they had to recruit informants and sources from outside the bureau's ranks."

However, Elliff related, before the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, Sullivan "defied Hoover s rule and assigned several unmarried agents from the local field office to grow long hair and beards and join the protesters.

"When the convention ended they cut their hair, shaved, and were reassigned to the West Coast. The agent in charge of the Chicago office apparently cooperated with Sullivan, and the director never learned of the incident."